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GENDER OR OCCUPATIONAL STATUS:

WHAT COUNTS MOST FOR WELL-BEING AT WORK?

Abstract

Literature has conceptualized well-being in the work domain through specific constructs, such as job satisfaction, work alienation, work-family conflict, and the perception of decision-making. Research from a gender perspective has examined gender differences in relation to these variables, showing that - compared to men - women in most cases experience lower job satisfaction, less decision-making, and higher work-family conflict. Another body of studies has driven the attention to the impact of the occupational status, demonstrating a general positive effect of high-status occupations. However, considering disparities between men and women in career success, the documented gender differences may also be influenced by the fact that women generally hold lower positions, as well as the effects of status may be related to the prevalence of men in high-status job.

The purpose of the present study was to extend past research by examining the effects of both gender and status on job satisfaction, work alienation, work-family conflict, and decision-making. To this aim 238 workers (52.5% males) holding high-status (N=98) and low-status (N=140) positions were involved in the research. Results indicated that when the relative salience of both gender and status is considered to understand well-being at work, status counts more than gender. Nevertheless, gender remains a significant dimension that may not be neglected, as it plays a relevant role, along with status, on job satisfaction and perception of decision-making. Implications are discussed.

Keywords: gender; status; occupational well-being; general linear models.

Work-related well-being is a specific facet of subjective well-being that can be described as a positive, fulfilling, affective-motivational state referred to the workplace experience (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Well-being at work is most commonly conceptualized as job satisfaction: if life satisfaction represents a global measure of subjective well-being (Diener, 2000), job satisfaction refers to well-being in one particular domain, i.e. the occupational context (Calvo-Salguero, Carrasco González, & Salinas Martínez de Lecea, 2010; Thompson & Phua, 2012). Job satisfaction has been defined as an individual's perception of how desired outcomes match expected outcomes in his or her job situation (Oshagbemi, 1999). High levels of satisfaction stem from a positive evaluation of how consistent work goals are with work demands and activities (Hill, 2009). Indeed, when individuals respond to questions about their overall job satisfaction, they make judgments about the extent to which their job meets what they want and need from an occupation (Magee, 2013).

Research has suggested a set of constructs that are related to job satisfaction. Among these constructs, one of the most relevant is work alienation. In organization studies, alienation refers to a psychological state of estrangement from work (Kanungo, 1979), which implies distancing or detachment from occupational tasks (Organ & Greene, 1981). In their recent meta-analysis, Chiaburu and colleagues (2014) provided convincing evidence that alienation represent a key concept in the study of employees' well-being, as it predicts important attitudes (e.g. organizational commitment, job insecurity), withdrawal and health outcomes (e.g. absenteeism, intent to quiet, burnout), and even contextual performance (e.g. task performance, antagonistic behavior).

Another relevant issue connected to well-being at work is the balance between paid work and private life. Although some scholars have recently investigated the positive interdependence between work and family roles (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), most studies have addressed such interdependence focusing especially on the construct of work-family conflict. Work-family conflict has been described as the result of incompatible pressures from an individual's work and family roles (Cinamon & Rich, 2002). It occurs when an individual encounters demands associated with one domain that are incompatible with demands associated with the other domain (Greenhaus & Buetell, 1985). In this perspective, the basic premise is that

people have a fixed amount of time and energy, and thus the more roles they have to fulfil, the greater the need to set priorities and negotiate with other parties and, consequently, the greater the stress of meeting all expectations (Barnett, 1998; Greenhaus & Singh, 2004). Moreover, although a level of conflict between work and family life may be inevitable for people attempting to balance many different and time-consuming roles, the conflict is intensified in those workers who have a high centrality of the family role: the occupation is not assessed and considered to be anything other than an intrusion on the family role (Carlson & Kacmar, 2000; Cinamon & Rich, 2002).

In addition to individual factors, work places present structural constraints that can influence workers' well-being. As Kanungo (1982) underlined, the perception of individual control and power over the work environment is a precondition for removing work alienation and increasing well-being. Indeed, the existence of mechanisms to voice opinions, i.e. decision participation, fosters employees' opportunity to take ownership of their projects, which increases their engagement in the organization and their task, which ultimately leads to higher well-being (Chiaburu, Thundiyil, & Wang, 2014).

A gender lens on well-being at work

It is well established that gender is a powerful differentiator of experiences in the workplace (e.g. Bond, Punnett, Pyle, Cazeca, & Cooperman, 2004; Michael et al., 2009; Ngo, Foley, Ji, & Loi, 2014; Salinas-Jiménez, Artés, & Salinas-Jiménez, 2013; Yoo, 2003). Although women's involvement in higher education and in the labor market has increased noticeably in the industrialized countries (Chao & Rones, 2007), research on the gendered patterns in workplaces still demonstrates differences in career success and occupational sex segregation, both across occupations and within occupational categories (Bond et al., 2004). Women face both the "glass ceiling", i.e. the invisible barrier that keeps women from rising higher status roles, regardless of their qualifications and competences, and the "sticky floor", i.e. the absence of career movements beyond the initial entry-level job (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001).

Many studies have addressed the issue of well-being at work from a gender perspective. Considering the above described disparities, female workers, compared to their male counterparts, should report lower levels of job satisfaction and should experience higher alienation and work-family conflict. However, findings are equivocal. Most studies identify women as experiencing higher levels of stress and lower levels of job satisfaction (Wilks & Neto, 2013; Clawson, Gerstel, & Crocker, 2009; Matud, 2004; Osorio, Cohen, Escobar, Salkowski-Bartlett, & Compton, 2003; Pines & Zaidman, 2003; Tytherleigh, Jacobs, Webb, Ricketts, & Cooper, 2007). Nonetheless, some research across different countries reports that women have equal or even greater levels of overall job satisfaction compared with men (Lowe, 2007; Magee, 2013; Shields, 2006). These results have been considered paradoxical because women tend to receive fewer job-related resources than do men (Cranford, Vosko, & Zukewich, 2003; Magee, 2013; Phelan, 1994). Two possible explanations have been advanced. First, in respect to men, women might have lower expectations concerning their jobs and their career aspirations (Heinz, Kühn, & Witzel, 2005). Second, female workers might make their comparisons against the labor market positions of other women, rather than all employees, and thus feel comparatively more satisfied (Magee, 2013; Phelan, 1994).

Despite the relevance of gender on work-related issues, surprisingly in research on work alienation gender has all but disappeared. Indeed, in many recent studies data are collected from male workforce (Shantz, Alfes, & Truss, 2014) or participants' gender is even not specified (i.e. Ceylan & Sulu, 2011; Sookoo, 2014; Sulu, Ceylan, & Kaynak, 2010). One of the few exception is represented by the meta-analysis of Chiaburu and colleagues (2014): although their work was not focused on gender, the relationship between gender and work alienation was tested and no significant evidence was found.

Instead, a large body of research from a gender perspective has specifically focused on the role played by the work-family conflict, i.e. the experience of activities related to work that interfere with family responsibilities. Studies which have examined gender differences in work-family conflict have shown mixed results, but generally report that women experience greater conflict than men (e.g. Calvo-Salguero et al., 2010; Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Colombo & Ghislieri, 2008; Cortese, Colombo, & Ghislieri, 2010; Duxbury & Higgins, 1994; Gutek, Searle, & Klepa, 1991; Lyonette, Crompton, & Wall, 2007; Van Veldhoven & Beijer,

2012). These results are usually explained in the light of social norms and stereotypes. As the role congruity theory of prejudice underlines, the social context affects the level of work-family conflict through descriptive and injunctive norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Such norms, held by individuals themselves, or by others in the work environment, prescribe what a good parent—and especially a good mother—is or should be like and thus intensify the conflict when individuals fail to match the prescribed roles (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Okimoto & Heilman, 2012; Rollero & Fedi, 2014; Van Engen, Vinkenburgh, & Dijkers 2012). However, research has also demonstrated that perceptions that family roles positively influence work roles (positive family-to-work spillover) relates to higher work-related well-being (Allis & O'Driscoll, 2008) and increased career satisfaction and job performance (Graves, Ohlott, & Ruderman, 2007; Miner, Pesonen, Smittick, Seigel, & Clark, 2014).

Occupational status and work-related well-being

Although some scholars have documented higher levels of stress among professional or managerial workers, compared to lower-status workers (Moen & You, 2000; Schieman, Whitestone, & Van Gundy, 2006), most studies yield the broad consensus that higher-status work conditions have positive effects on well-being (e.g. Booth & Van Ours, 2009; Calvo-Salguero et al., 2010; Clark, Frijters, & Shields, 2008; Salinas-Jiménez et al., 2013). In his classical study on job satisfaction, Gruenberg (1980) found that, compared to blue collar occupations, white collar occupations entailed fewer routinized job characteristics such as autonomy to plan, opportunities to learn, and chances to use one's competences. Subsequently, the intrinsic gratification produced by these job conditions was the most powerful predictor of overall job satisfaction.

Indeed, prestige jobs are more likely to involve direction and planning. Individuals holding high-status occupations experience professional, nonroutine, and autonomous working conditions, associated with greater authority and pay (Riley & Keith, 2004). Such conditions allow workers to develop a greater sense of control in their work than those who are less involved, which in turn leads them having a higher level of job

satisfaction (Calvo-Salguero et al., 2010). On the contrary, lower occupational status and educational level are usually associated with higher physical stress, greater lack of job control and lower job satisfaction (Niezborala, Marquie, Baracat, Esquirol, & Soulat, 2008; Salinas-Jiménez et al., 2013).

The occupational status plays a relevant role also on work alienation. Since this concept refers to a psychological state of estrangement from work (Kanungo, 1979), high-status workers should show lower alienation, as they are more engaged and autonomous in their job. Actually, empirical research confirms that the professional and managerial workers are the least alienated (Banai & Reisel, 2003; Chiaburu, Diaz, & De Vos, 2013). Moreover, the status influences the perception and the experience of the structural constraints of the organization. Indeed, the decision-making processes, which are so relevant for workers' engagement and well-being (Chiaburu et al., 2014), are strongly connected to the occupational status, as low-status workers feel a lack of job autonomy and perceive a limited freedom to have an impact on their activities (Chiaburu et al., 2013). Particular types of work situation, such as machines, assembly lines, and continuous-process production, which are prerogative of low-status occupations, show a direct association with alienation and low decision-making (McKinlay & Marcae, 2011). In low-skilled jobs, workers feel alienated and not involved in their work, because they seem to assume not to make a significant contribution to the core functions of the organization (Halbesleben & Clark, 2010).

In sum, holding positions of greater autonomy and responsibility seems to have positive effects on work-related well-being. However, an alternative perspective has driven the attention to the potential costs of high status. According to Schieman and colleagues (2006), people in higher-status work conditions are exposed to a higher level of a particular chronic stressor: the work-family conflict. Based on studies that documented this conflict among professional or managerial workers (Grzywacz, Almeida, & McDonald, 2002; Moen & Yu, 2000), these authors suggest the *stress of higher status hypothesis*: since high-status workers have more job demands, they also experience conditions, such as working longer hours, which foster work-family conflict. In line with the *stress of higher status hypothesis*, Schieman and colleagues (2006) found that among a large sample of Canadian workers both men and women in higher-status jobs reported higher levels of work-family conflict than those in lower-status occupations. Divergent results

were obtained by Lyonette and colleagues (2007), who examined work-life conflict in men and women with manual versus managerial roles in two different European countries, i.e. Portugal and Great Britain. They found that two groups experienced very high levels of work-family conflict: routine and manual women in Portugal and professional and managerial women in Britain. These differences were explained referring to the national contexts, as Portugal and Britain are different in terms of attitudes toward gender roles and the domestic division of labor. Specifically, long hours of domestic work and lack of support from partners and networks would contribute to the conflict showed by Portuguese women working in manual jobs, whereas the increasing work demands experienced by British women would contribute to their high level of work-family conflict (Lyonette et al., 2007).

The current study

As seen, research has documented that well-being in the work domain is conceptualized through specific constructs, such as job satisfaction, work alienation, work-family conflict, and the perception of decision-making. On the one hand, literature from a gender perspective has examined gender differences in relation to these variables, showing that - compared to men - women in most cases experience lower job satisfaction and higher work-family conflict (Calvo-Salguero et al., 2010; Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Matud, 2004; Osorio et al., 2003; Tytherleigh et al., 2007; Van Veldhoven & Beijer, 2012). On the other hand, a body of studies has driven the attention to the impact of the occupational status, demonstrating a general positive effect of high-status occupations, even with some divergent results about the influence of status on work-family conflict (Booth & Van Ours, 2009; Calvo-Salguero et al., 2010; Clark et al., 2008; McKinlay & Marcaeu, 2011; Salinas-Jiménez et al., 2013; Schieman et al., 2006). However, with the only exception of Lyonette and colleagues (2007) about work-family conflict, research has not considered the impact of both gender and status on work-related well-being. Indeed, the above documented gender differences may also be influenced by the fact that women generally hold lower positions and less control over their own work, as well as the effects of status may be related to the prevalence of men in high-status job. Thus, we believe

in the importance of examining the relative salience of both gender and status to understanding well-being at work.

Specifically, the present study aimed at assessing the influence of both gender and status on the most relevant well-being related constructs in the work domain: job satisfaction, work alienation, work-family conflict, and decision-making. On the grounds of previous research we set the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Both gender (being male) and status would positively affect job satisfaction;

Hypothesis 2. High-status workers would show lower work alienation, whereas gender would not play any significant role;

Hypothesis 3. Both gender (being women) and low status would increase work-family conflict;

Hypothesis 4. Both gender (being male) and status would positively affect the perception of decision-making.

Method

Participants

A total of 238 adults (52.5% males) aged from 20 to 70 (average age = 39.56; $SD = 13.70$) and living in Italy participated in the research. Among participants, 58.6% were married, 32.4% were unmarried, and 9% divorced or widowed. About the education, the majority was high school (43.8%) or college graduated (31.7%), whereas the others (24.5%) had a lower level of education. Concerning occupational status, 98 subjects (58.2% males) were considered high-status workers, as they managed or supervised at least three other workers in public or private organizations (e.g. hospitals, schools, hotels, banks). The 140 low-status subjects (48.6% males) were instead recruited among sales personnel in superstores.

Measures

Data were collected via a self-reported questionnaire, which took about 20 minutes to complete.

Anonymity of the respondents was assured.

The following variables were investigated:

Job satisfaction. Participants responded to the Job Satisfaction Blank (McNichols, Stahl & Manley, 1978), a wide used scale made up of four items (i.e. "I feel satisfied with my job"). Items were scored on a seven-point scale from (1) never, to (7) always. For the current study Cronbach's alpha was .89.

Work alienation. The alienation was assessed using the eight-item Work Alienation Scale (Nair & Vohra, 2009) (i.e. "I do not feel connected to the daily events in my workplace"). Answers were provided on a seven-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. For the current study Cronbach's alpha was .83.

Work-family conflict. Participants responded to the Work To Family subscale of the Work Family Conflict Scale (Matthews, Kath, & Barnes-Farrell, 2010). The subscale was made up of three items (i.e. "I have to miss family activities due to the amount of time I must spend on work responsibilities") scored on a five-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. For the current study Cronbach's alpha was .60.

Decision-making. The perception of decision-making in the workplace was investigated using the four-item Decision Making Scale (Hage & Aiken, 1967) (i.e. "I feel that I am my own boss in most matters"). Items were scored on a seven-point scale ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (7) strongly agree. For the current study Cronbach's alpha was .84.

Socio-demographic items. We collected the following data items: age, gender, marital status, educational level, and occupational status.

Results

The statistical analyses were carried out using the software SPSS 21.0. Table 1 reports descriptive statistics and correlations among all measures. Job satisfaction resulted negatively related to work-family conflict

and work alienation, but positively related to decision-making. A strong positive correlation was found between work alienation and work-family conflict, whereas work alienation and decision-making were negatively correlated.

Subsequently, four general linear model analyses were performed to test the effect of gender, occupational status, and interaction between gender and status on: (1) job satisfaction, (2) work alienation, (3) work-family conflict, and (4) decision-making. Concerning job satisfaction, both gender and status played a relevant role, as women and high-status workers showed higher satisfaction than their male and low-status counterpart respectively (Tables 2 and 3). In case of work alienation, only status was significant, being low-status subjects more alienated than high-status workers (Tables 4 and 5). Similar results were obtained about work-family conflict: only occupational status influenced such conflict (Tables 6 and 7). Finally, decision-making was considered as dependent variable: in this case a significant interaction between gender and status was found, as high-status women showed the highest scores of decision-making (Tables 8 and 9).

Discussion

As above explained, literature reports two alternative perspectives to explain differences in work related well-being, i.e. one focused on gender and the other focused on occupational status. The present study was designed to assess the effect of both gender and status on the most relevant well-being related constructs in the work domain: job satisfaction, work alienation, work-family conflict, and decision-making. Taken together, results indicate that, compared to gender, status plays a more relevant role, as it influences all the considered variables. As expected (Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3), high-status subjects show higher job satisfaction but lower work alienation and work-family conflict. In line with literature (Booth & Van Ours, 2009; Calvo-Salugero et al., 2010; Clark et al., 2008; McKinlay & Marceau, 2011; Salinas-Jiménez et al., 2013), our findings confirm a general positive effect of high-status occupations.

Results concerning gender and the interaction between gender and status appear to be more controversial. First, contrary to what would be expected (Hypothesis 1), women refer higher job satisfaction than men. Similar results in previous studies have been considered paradoxical, because women tend to receive fewer job-related resources than do men (Cranford et al., 2003; Magee, 2013; Phelan, 1994). However, when men and women occupy similar positions and thus receive similar job-related resources – as in the present study - such findings can not be considered paradoxical. The higher satisfaction in women could be related to traditional gender roles and cultural stereotypes. Indeed, on the one hand, cultural stereotypes depicting women as relationship and nurturing-oriented and men as task-oriented influence both genders expectations about job (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Okimoto & Heilman, 2012; Rollero & Tartaglia, 2013): in respect to men, women might have lower expectations about their professional aspirations and thus might feel more satisfied than men, professional status being equal (Heinz et al., 2005). On the other hand, in evaluating job satisfaction individuals could make comparison within their gender group: thus, women could feel comparatively more satisfied than men because they consider the labor market positions of other women, rather than all employees (Magee, 2013; Phelan, 1994).

Second, contrary to expectations (Hypothesis 3), gender did not play a relevant role in work-family conflict. In line with the role congruity theory of prejudice (Eagly & Karau, 2002), literature generally report that women experience greater conflict than men (e.g. Calvo-Salguero et al., 2010; Cinamon & Rich, 2002; Duxbury & Higgins, 1994; Gutek et al., 1991; Lyonette et al., 2007; Van Veldhoven & Beijer, 2012). We may put forward two hypotheses to explain our divergent results. One hypothesis may be that long lasting gender differences in the work domain are actually decreasing, as a result of women's stronger involvement in the labor market and in high-status positions. The other hypothesis may be that working women tend to reduce the cognitive dissonance between their two commitments, i.e. work and family. They are in some way at odds with each other and, therefore, minimize the contrast and any difficulties in managing these different roles (see also De Piccoli & Rollero, 2010). Indeed, psychological and social costs may be greater when individuals move away from traditional roles, as in the case of women holding

professional positions, which could interfere in their traditional role of focusing on the family (Slotkin, 2008).

Third, contrary to our hypothesis (Hypothesis 4), high-status women showed the highest scores of decision-making. This finding may be explained referring to the same considerations reported about job satisfaction and work-family conflict. On the one hand, high-status women could make comparison within their gender group rather than within their occupational status. On the other, since they have moved away from traditional gender roles, they “need” to emphasize the benefits of their professional position.

In sum, the present study highlights a core point: when the relative salience of both gender and status is considered to understand well-being at work, status counts most. Since there are no gender differences within the same status groups on work alienation and work-family conflict, we can conclude that alienation and conflict are not gender issues, but status issues. Nevertheless, gender remains a significant dimension that may not be neglected, as it plays a relevant role, along with status, on job satisfaction and perception of decision-making.

Some caveat deserves mention. One of the most significant issue pertains to the importance of the cultural context. Our research was carried out in Italy, which is one of the less equalitarian European countries according to the Gender Empowerment Measure index (i.e. a rank of 21st among 91 world nations) (UNDP, 2007). As Lyonette and colleagues (2007) have documented, there are cultural specificities that affect gender roles and the work domain. Thus, generalising our results to other cultural contexts requires caution. Rather, future research should investigate the replicability of these findings in different countries.

Moreover, since we obtained several unexpected results and could only suppose potential explanation, further studies should investigate whether the suggested considerations are meaningful to male and female workers. Specifically, qualitative studies can contribute to better understand this issue and to examine more in depth the impact of status and gender on work-related well-being. For example, the issue pertaining social comparisons could be explicitly addressed, exploring whether women evaluate their work-related well-being making comparisons against the occupational positions of other women.

Finally, future research should consider the effects of both gender and status on other relevant and complex outcomes, such as the quality of working life. As Sirgy and colleagues (2001) underline, quality of working life goes beyond job satisfaction, as it involves the influence of the workplace on satisfaction in non-work life domains, and satisfaction with overall life, as well as personal happiness, and subjective well-being.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between the studied variables.

	1	2	3	4
Job Satisfaction (1)		-.47**	-.15*	.17*
Work alienation (2)			.39**	-.18**
Work-family conflict (3)				-.05
Decision-making (4)				
Mean	4.47	3.04	2.36	3.57
SD	1.20	1.20	.85	1.53

* p<.05 **p<.01

Table 2. Descriptive statistics concerning job satisfaction.

		Mean	Standard Deviation
Men	High status	4.60	.96
	Low status	3.87	1.06
	Total	4.21	1.08
Women	High status	4.97	1.18
	Low status	4.66	1.31
	Total	4.77	1.27
Total	High status	4.76	1.06
	Low status	4.28	1.26
	Total	4.47	1.20

Table 3. GLM analysis: the effect of gender and status on job satisfaction.

Source	df	F	Sig.	η^2
Gender	1	13.83	.000	.06
Status	1	11.22	.001	.05
Gender*status	1	1.80	.180	.01
Error	226			
Total	230			
Corrected total	229			

Corrected R² = .10

Table 4. Descriptive statistics concerning work alienation.

		Mean	Standard Deviation
Men	High status	2.69	1.20
	Low status	3.46	1.20
	Total	3.07	1.22
Women	High status	2.80	1.14
	Low status	3.14	1.20
	Total	3.00	1.18
Total	High status	2.74	1.12
	Low status	3.29	1.21
	Total	3.04	1.20

Table 5. GLM analysis: the effect of gender and status on work alienation.

Source	df	F	Sig.	η^2
Gender	1	.41	.522	.00
Status	1	11.28	.001	.05
Gender*status	1	1.78	.184	.01
Error	200			
Total	204			
Corrected total	203			

Corrected R² = .06

Table 6. Descriptive statistics concerning work-family conflict.

		Mean	Standard Deviation
Men	High status	2.34	.85
	Low status	2.44	.76
	Total	2.39	.81
Women	High status	2.01	.69
	Low status	2.51	.97
	Total	2.33	.91
Total	High status	2.20	.80
	Low status	2.48	.88
	Total	2.36	.86

Table 7. GLM analysis: the effect of gender and status on work-family conflict.

Source	df	F	Sig.	η^2
Gender	1	1.32	.252	.01
Status	1	7.30	.007	.03
Gender*status	1	3.23	.074	.01
Error	231			
Total	235			
Corrected total	234			

Corrected R² = .04

Table 8. Descriptive statistics concerning decision-making.

		Mean	Standard Deviation
Men	High status	3.57	1.62
	Low status	3.55	1.24
	Total	3.56	1.43
Women	High status	3.87	1.63
	Low status	3.35	1.61
	Total	3.58	1.63
Total	High status	3.69	1.63
	Low status	3.47	1.45
	Total	3.57	1.53

Table 9. GLM analysis: the effect of gender and status on decision-making.

Source	df	F	Sig.	η^2
Gender	1	.32	.859	.00
Status	1	.93	.337	.00
Gender*status	1	3.88	.049	.02
Error	226			
Total	230			
Corrected total	229			

Corrected R² = .02